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Immigration Policy Today

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EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH

Immigration Policy Today

Susan Pozo

ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS

- *Migration scholars can help to steer the debate over immigration policy—which is big on rhetoric and small on evidence—toward more productive areas.*
- *Immigrant apprehensions—a reasonable indicator of unauthorized immigrant inflows—have fallen dramatically over the past two decades.*

In the 1980s, following a sustained shift in the source of U.S. immigrants, academics, the U.S. public, and legislative officials engaged in healthy debate about the U.S. immigration system. The discussion eventually led to the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986. This legislation contained two major provisions. First, it provided legal residency status for some undocumented immigrants who had continuously resided in the United States for a period of time. Its second provision was to impose sanctions on employers that knowingly hired undocumented immigrants. The IRCA's intention was to bring undocumented immigrants "out of the shadows" while putting an end to the pull of unauthorized immigrants from employers.

We are currently experiencing another intense period of debate about immigration. The discussion today is broader and pertains to both illegal and legal immigration. It has transcended geographic borders and even extends beyond immigration to Brexit (the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union), the contributions of the international trading system to poverty and prosperity, and the costs and benefits of social uniformity versus diversity. In short, current conversations focus on finding the ideal balance between globalization and tighter borders. Of concern, however, is the tone of these debates taking place at home and abroad. It is more visceral, more extreme, more emotional, and more uncomfortable than 30 years ago when IRCA was passed.

The public today is fiercely divided about U.S. immigration. On one side, immigrants are characterized as undeserving, taking advantage of a generous welfare system, and criminal in nature. Another side appeals to American ideals and lauds the U.S. immigration system as the foundation for our present-day society—a melting pot giving rise to American ingenuity and creativity through diversity. A huge gulf exists between the two sides, as is evidenced by intransience in the Congress on the question of immigration policy, by the series

of presidential executive orders and their reversals from court rulings, and by vocal public opinion.

The current debate is big on rhetoric and small on evidence, with the issues having been framed in terms of the personal, making true discourse difficult at best. Migration scholars, however, can help to steer the discussion toward more productive areas. One way they can provide more clarity is with respect to very basic information concerning the alleged surge

Barriers to mobility converted the undocumented from a circular and temporary population in the U.S. into a permanent feature.

in illegal immigration. According to the current administration, the United States is experiencing a deluge in undocumented immigrant inflows. In fact, basic data—specifically, reports from the U.S. government—show otherwise. One indicator of the levels of illegal immigration today are tallies of the apprehension levels by the border patrol and other immigration officials. Figure 1 presents this data from the Department of Homeland Security from 2000 to the present. The chart clearly shows that apprehensions, an imperfect yet reasonable indicator of variations in the level of inflows, have in fact fallen dramatically over the past two decades. Current apprehension levels are less than one-third of their levels in 2000. Levels this low were last observed in 1972, even though dollar and personnel resources devoted to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, have risen substantially from 2000 to the present (see American Immigration Council [2017]).

While the Department of Homeland Security data suggest that the flow of undocumented immigrants has been declining overall, this is not true of the number of undocumented immigrants already in the United States. The common

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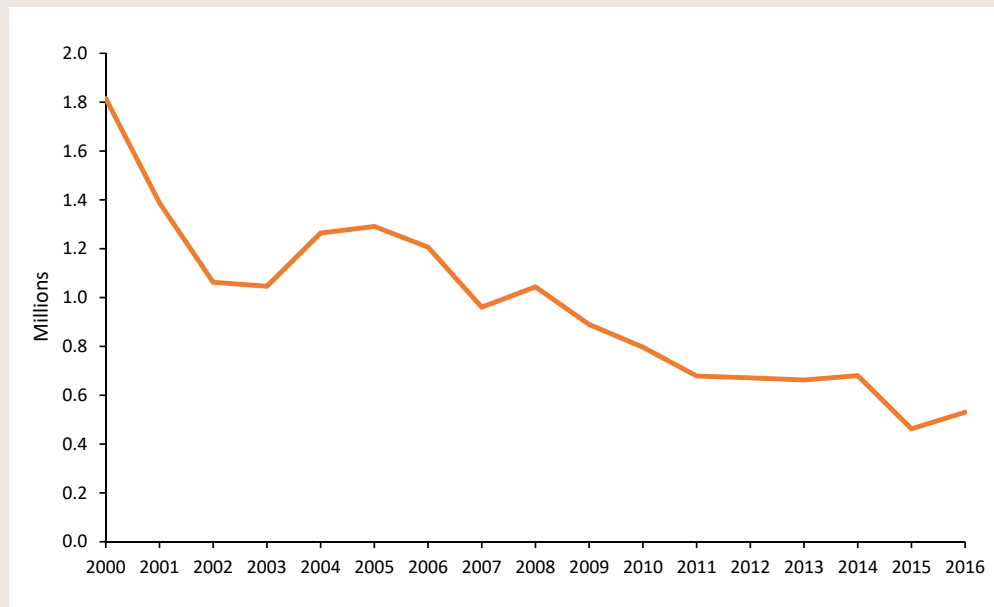
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Figure 1 Undocumented Immigrant Apprehensions, 2000–2016



SOURCE: Department of Homeland Security, <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2016/table33> (accessed July 20, 2018).

perception is that, after undocumented crossings became more onerous and risky because of enhanced border enforcement, the existing stock of unauthorized immigrants tended to permanently settle in the United States. Instead of periodically visiting home and maintaining roots there, with expectations of an eventual permanent return, the undocumented dug in more deeply. Barriers to mobility converted the undocumented from a circular and temporary population in the United States into a permanent feature, as outlined by Massey, Durand, and Pren (2016). Data are supportive of this idea, with the stock of undocumented steadily rising in concert with increases in immigration enforcement (Krogstad, Passel, and Cohn 2017). Immigrants became more entrenched by longer continuous tenure due to the larger costs of periodically returning home, which in turn resulted in more U.S.-born children and greater commitments to making the United States home.

The general public's lack of basic education about immigration contributes to an unproductive

discussion about immigrants. A recent poll by the Pew Research Center (2018) reveals that a majority of Americans believe there are more undocumented than documented immigrants in the United States today, when in fact only about one-quarter of all immigrants are unauthorized.

Why are immigrants, whether documented or not, less welcome today? Why has chain migration—the concept that settled immigrants will attract other family to migrate—become a dirty phrase? Several factors and significant levels of misinformation have likely contributed to rolling up the welcome mat. A common charge is that immigrants take jobs away from the native born. There exists an extensive literature that attempts to measure the degree to which immigrants compete with the native-born in the job market (see National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [2017], specifically Chapter 5, for a review of the studies). A common finding is that the recent low-skilled immigrants do tend to compete with existing low-skilled workers, particularly with more seasoned immigrants, but also with a

small segment of the U.S. native-born labor force—high school dropouts. Other studies find that the presence of immigrant workers raises the productivity of native-born workers along with their earnings. The dynamic contributions of immigration to the economy—providing a source of labor in an era of declining birth rates—are increasingly recognized. With a few exceptions, there is little evidence that native workers are disadvantaged by immigration.

An important reason for relatively low competition between immigrants and the native born involves mobility by immigrants—particularly those who are low-skilled—who tend to exhibit high degrees of geographic mobility (Cadena and Kovak 2016). They are less stuck to a particular geographic area, moving to fill job vacancies in more distant areas, in areas where economic growth is highest and greater excess demand for workers exists. Table 1 presents evidence of this greater mobility, with information on the percentage of those born within the 50 U.S. states (native-born) and the percent of nonnaturalized immigrants, who moved to their current location from a noncontiguous U.S. state in the past year.

Two points are worth noting. First, immigrants are more apt to move, as revealed by the percentages displayed. For example, in 2001, only 1.6 percent of natives moved to a noncontiguous state, whereas 2.1 percent of nonnaturalized immigrants did. Immigrants “grease” the labor market, possibly permitting the economy faster economic growth by more efficiently allocating workers to where they are needed. This also explains perhaps why immigrants are not directly competing with natives, as they quickly tend to move onward if the labor market is slack. Second, over the past two decades there has been a gradual reduction in the mobility of nonnaturalized immigrants. Using this metric, 2.1 percent of the

nonnaturalized population in 2001 moved between noncontiguous states while only 1.6 percent did in 2016. This could be because of changes in the vintages of the immigrants (and their characteristics) or because of the greater scrutiny immigrants are experiencing. The increases in interior enforcement might be tying down immigrants more firmly to current locations where they may more easily blend.

Another concern about immigrants that may be contributing to greater animosity is the charge that immigrants—both documented and undocumented—and refugees display more criminal behavior than the native born. Here again, migration scholars can offer carefully crafted studies that use representative data in place of anecdotes to ascertain the actual contributions of refugees, immigrants, and the undocumented to crime in the United States. Those studies provide ample evidence that runs counter to the notion that these groups exhibit higher rates of criminality. Chalfin (2015), for example, shows that recent immigration flows have contributed toward driving *down* crime rates. And in specifically analyzing refugee flows into the United States, Amuedo-Dorantes, Bansak, and Pozo (2018) find no causal evidence that refugees have impacted violent crime rates in the United States.

More attention must be paid to serious analysis of immigration and data about immigrants and their influence on the economy. The forthcoming book titled *The Human and Economic Implications of Twenty-First Century Immigration Policy* (Upjohn Press) presents the findings of prominent immigration scholars who use data and theory to help unravel facts concerning immigration. This book provides a framework that helps move us from the personal to the analytical, to facilitate a more systematic appraisal of immigration and the policies

Table 1 Mobility of U.S.-Born and Noncitizens Aged 25–64

	Percent who moved from a noncontiguous state in the past year	
	U.S.-born	Noncitizens
2001	1.6	2.1
2005	1.7	1.9
2010	1.5	1.6
2015	1.6	1.7

NOTE: Individuals born in U.S. territories (e.g., Puerto Rico) were excluded from the analysis.

SOURCE: Computed from ACS one-year samples, IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

before us. The authors document and provide careful analyses along several dimensions, from the fiscal impacts of immigrants in the United States, assimilation along generational lines, the effects of enhanced immigration enforcement at the interior of the United States, and alternative blueprints for allocating refugees. The authors also offer suggestions on the use of tools of international trade to assess immigration policy today. The public must be better informed to more effectively debate immigration, and this volume can help set us on that path.

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This article draws on concepts highlighted in the forthcoming book The Human and Economic Implications of Twenty-First Century Immigration Policy, soon to be published by the Upjohn Institute. Visit <https://upjohn.org/publications/upjohn-institute-press/human-and-economic-implications-twenty-first-century-immigration> for more information.

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